

Zoltan J. Kosztołnyik

(1930–2006)



*"In my spirit and thought I remained
a European of Hungarian origin"¹*

Zoltan J. Kosztołnyik, Professor Emeritus of Medieval History at Texas A&M died 28 April 2006, in Austin, in a tragic car accident. He had been driving with his wife to Austin to do some research work in the library, midway his car was hit by a truck coming from a side road.

He was born in Heves on 15 December 1930 as the first son of Zoltan Kosztołnyik and Irene Kosztołnyik, a family of the upper social strata of Hungary. He had a younger brother (Edward) and a sister (Monica). He grew up in a loving family. In March 1945 they left the country to spend four years in Austria. He continued his interrupted secondary studies in the Hungarian Gymnasium of Passau, Germany, which he finished in 1949. In 1948 he lost his beloved mother. In 1949 the Kosztołnyik family left Austria and moved to the United States of America. First they settled in Minnesota, where he attended Nazareth Hall Seminary (1949–1950). Then, in 1950 they moved to Cleveland (Ohio State), the city of the largest Hungarian minority in the USA and perhaps of the western hemisphere. Here he continued his studies at St. Mary's Major Seminary (1950–1951). Immigration brought challenging times for him, he had to learn well a new language (English), and his father remarried, but soon became sick. Being the eldest one among the children, he had to interrupt his studies and work hard in a factory (The National Tool Company, Cleveland) for four years. He worked together with fellow Hungarians, who were immigrants like him and were formerly officers or teachers etc. and who often did not speak English at all. This situation was like an "ethnic ghetto", which helped him preserve his identity and at the same time hindered his acculturation to his new home. As a naturalized US citizen he was enrolled as soldier in 1955, and spent 18 months in Stuttgart, Germany. At the age of 26, he restarted his studies at St. Bonaventura University (New York State), where he concentrated mainly on history and German literature (1956–1959). He got his B. A. degree "cum laude" at 1959. Then he went to Fordham University, New York (1959–1961), where he obtained an M.A. degree in medieval history. His major professor was Jeremiah O'Sullivan. He would have liked to deal with Hungarian medieval history, but his professors advised him to rather

¹ The quotation is from my interview with Professor Kosztołnyik (July 1996) *Aetas* 12:2-3 (1997), 198–205.

treat the age of reformation. To pursue a PhD in Hungarian medieval studies he moved to New York University (1963–1968), where he studied under Professor Marshall W. Baldwin, who became his most important “mentor.” Professor Baldwin supported his interests in Hungarian medieval history and at the same time emphasized that Hungarian history had to be always researched in European context. A Fulbright scholarship took him to Vienna University, where Zoltan Kosztolnyik spent two years (1963–1965). These years in Vienna may be regarded as decisive years for him, as he studied with Heinrich Fichteneau, Friedrich Heer, Alphons Lhotsky and others. The years in Vienna were formative both from a scholarly perspective – as they laid the basis of his PhD thesis, and also from a personal perspective, for it was here that he met a fellow Fulbright scholar, Penelope South, at the Vienna Academy of Music. Once married they settled in Bryan, Texas, where they had two daughters (Karen and Elisabeth Kosztolnyik). Coming back from Vienna, Zoltan Kosztolnyik continued his studies at New York University under the guidance of Marshall W. Baldwin. In 1968 he obtained his PhD with Honors in medieval history. In 1967 he became Instructor in History at the History Department of Texas A&M University (TAMU) in College Station, Texas in 1967 where he remained all his life. He was promoted to Assistant Professor (1968–1972), then to Associate Professor (1972–1981), and a full professorship in 1981. He retired in 2003, after 36 years of teaching and became Professor Emeritus at the age of 73. On the very day of his death he wanted to do some research work in the library of Austin University. He would not see the printed output of his last book, or the published version of one his last studies, journal articles.² He was known as teacher devoted to his students and colleagues, whom he exhorted often to “not give up”. Although his specialty was medieval history, when it as needed, he also gave lectures or seminars from ancient, Roman history, Renaissance and Reformation, Enlightenment and so on. In 1995 he received the Texas A&M University/College of Liberal Arts Distinguished Teaching Award.

In addition to his dedication to teaching, he was passionate about research, which he pursued with joy. At the same time, I think, he also wanted to serve not only Clio, the Muse of history, or with a modern phrase the science of history, but his native country, Hungary, that he never ceased to love. Most of his research work and publications were connected to Hungary, more specifically to Hungarians during the Middle Ages. He wrote five books during his lifetime, all of them on medieval Hungarian history.³ His other publications include 14 chapters of books or entries in lexicons or encyclopedias, 42 studies or articles in different periodicals (including Hungarian periodicals, like *Századok*, *Történelmi Szemle*, *Aetas*, *Chronica*, *Acta Historica Szegediensis*) and 55 review essays and book reviews.

² “The Influence of Latin Canon law on the Golden Bulls issued by Andrew II of Hungary,” *Chronica* 5 (2005) 44–61.

³ *Five Eleventh Century Hungarian Kings: Their Policies and Their Relations with Rome*. New York 1981; *From Coloman the Learned to Bela III (1095–1196); Hungarian Domestic Policies and Their Impact upon Foreign Affairs*. New York 1987; *Hungary in the Thirteenth Century*. New York 1996; *Hungary under the early Arpads, 890s to 1063*. New York 2002; *Dynastic Policy of the Arpads, from Géza I to Emery (1074–1204)*. New York 2006.

Most of these publications dealt with Hungarian medieval history as well. He was an active participant of conferences in the USA and abroad, he organized and chaired sessions and held lectures in these conferences, altogether 63. Among these conferences one must mention the international congresses held in Kalamazoo and Leeds. He invited scholars from Hungary to these sessions, including me and other colleagues of our institute or university (László Koszta, István Petrovics, Ágnes T. Horváth etc.), who participated at lectures organized and chaired by him.

Professor Kosztoľnyik began his research work with Saint Gerard and his activity. Church history remained one of his most beloved research fields during his activity. A bit later political history became his main field of interest and research. He focused on the foreign and domestic policy of the Árpád dynasty and dealt with different problems of the Árpád era (till 1301) in his articles and books. Some of his publications show his growing interest in legal history. Dealing with the traditional themes of historiography he neither joined to historical schools or methods, just followed the advice of his eminent professors of the New York University or Vienna University. He can be regarded a pragmatic historian or even a conservative historian in the best sense of the word: he based his narrative and analysis mainly on the primary sources besides using a lot of secondary sources as well. One of his specialities was the frequent use of mottos taken from primary sources (chronicles etc.). He deserves praise for placing Hungarian policy and institutions in the framework of European history, and in his emphasis on comparative analysis he can be considered an innovator.

SÁNDOR LÁSZLÓ TÓTH